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BENIN: A GROWING BASE FOR LIBYAN SUBVERSION

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Libya in recent years has eagerly responded to the security and economic problems facing Benin, supplying increasing amounts of financial and military aid and cultivating close ideological ties to the left-leaning regime of President Kerekou. Tripoli's large presence and extensive activities in Benin are a growing worry to the moderate neighbors of this small west African country, who fear that Benin is rapidly becoming a base of Libyan subversion in the region. Although Kerekou has allowed the Libyans a fairly free hand in Benin, he recognizes the need to stay on good terms with France--Benin's former colonizer and main source of economic aid--and Nigeria, the most powerful state in the region.

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Kerekou has managed to stay in power for nine years--longer than any other government in this coup-plagued country--but his regime's security concerns and deteriorating economy have opened the door to Libyan blandishments. Bitter factional rivalries rooted in personal, tribal, regional, and ideological differences plague the regime. The predominant faction, an unofficial grouping of Marxist radicals known as the "league," poses the greatest challenge. This group appears to be the main force behind the regime's leftist orientation and its favorable disposition toward Libya.* Kerekou, moreover, has been preoccupied about external attempts to overthrow his regime ever since 1977 when government forces foiled an airborne attack on Cotonou by Beninese exiles and white mercenaries. Since then, he has welcomed military

*After embracing Marxist-Leninism in 1974, the Kerekou regime adopted a socialist development strategy and established close relations with the Soviets, Cubans, and other Communist states. Since then, Benin has consistently supported radical Third World positions on global issues and followed the Soviet line in international forums.

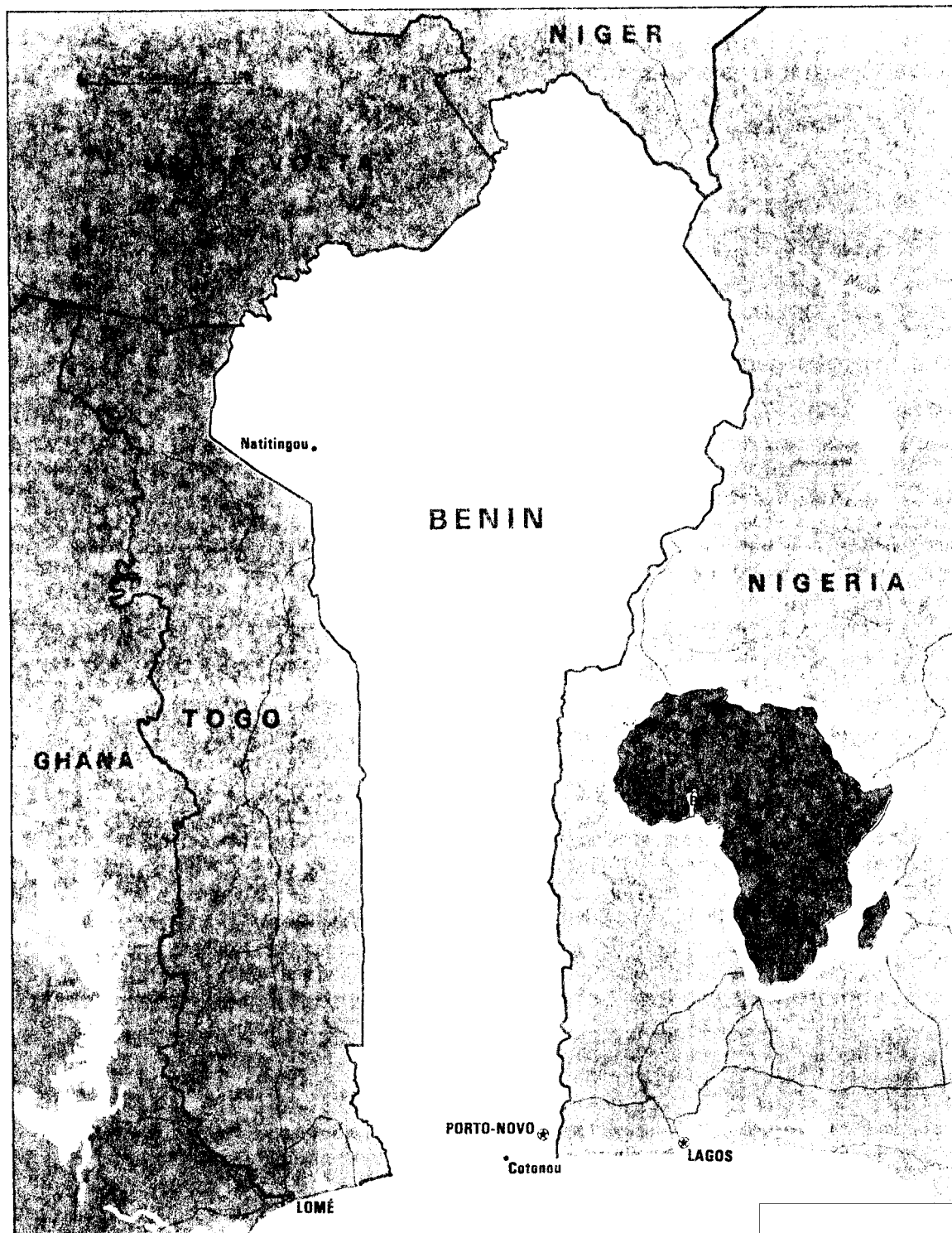
25X1

4 November 1981

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SECRET

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25X1

4 November 1981

SECRET

SECRET

support from Libya to supplement aid from Benin's leading arms supplier, the Soviet Union, as well as from Cuba and other Communist countries.* [REDACTED] 25X1

Libya reportedly has become Benin's fourth-largest source of foreign economic support after France, the European Community, and West Germany. No figures are available on the dollar value of Libya's economic aid. Benin's economic straits have been brought on by problems in the agricultural sector, government corruption and mismanagement, unchecked spending, and reliance on unproductive state enterprises. [REDACTED] 25X1

Ideological Affinities

Benin's radical posture and Libya's anti-imperialist, anticolonialist views are made for each other. One of Muammar Qadhafi's major goals is to displace French influence in West Africa and promote the establishment of a pan-Islamic state in the region's heavily Islamic Sahel region.** [REDACTED] 25X1

Benin's proximity to uranium-rich Niger, which maintains close ties with France, and Nigeria, a country with a large Muslim population, offers Libya a strategic location from which to pursue this goal. Although only 12 percent of Benin's population is Muslim, it borders Niger and Nigeria, and provides fertile ground for Qadhafi's pan-Islamic vision. Benin serves Libyan purposes by waging a self-proclaimed Marxist struggle against its French colonial heritage and by lending political support to Libyan positions on international issues. [REDACTED] 25X1

*Some 50 Soviet military advisers are present in Benin. Most are involved in training the Beninese armed forces. Others reportedly are assisting in the construction of a Soviet-financed military airfield northwest of Cotonou. If the airfield is built to the maximum proposed length of 3,000 meters, it will be suitable for use by long-range transport and naval reconnaissance aircraft. The Cubans provide a small but important presidential security guard for Kerekou. [REDACTED] 25X1

**The Sahel includes Chad, Niger, Mali, Senegal, and the northern regions of Upper Volta, Benin, and Nigeria. [REDACTED] 25X1

4 November 1981

SECRET

SECRET

Libyan Activities

The increase in Libyan activities in Benin has been substantial in the past year. There are now an estimated 97 official Libyans there involved in military and economic aid projects and suspected covert activities. Kerekou was given red-carpet treatment in Tripoli last September and three Libyan delegations have subsequently visited Cotonou. [REDACTED]

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Since the late 1970s Tripoli has provided military training in Libya and Benin, armored cars, small arms, uniforms and rations, and cash for military expenses. Supplies often arrive in Benin at night on Libyan commercial airline flights. [REDACTED]

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Libya has given Benin \$10 million to build roads, a hospital, and housing projects, and has financed cattle-raising, fishing, and mining projects. In addition it has picked up the tab for overdue civil service salaries, and reportedly will soon open a bank in Cotonou. Tripoli has also financed the building of several mosques and has distributed money to Benin's Muslim community. [REDACTED]

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Benin appears to be a transit point for flights carrying West Africans of varied nationalities to and from Tripoli for military and ideological training. The Africans are recruited from the ranks of the unemployed and homeless in Benin and neighboring countries, particularly Nigeria, which has become a regional magnet for frustrated job seekers. Some 300 to 1,500 people have been sent to Tripoli from Cotonou thus far. Upon returning to Cotonou they probably are infiltrated back into their countries of origin. [REDACTED]

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4 November 1981

SECRET

SECRET

Regional Reactions to the Libyan Threat

Benin's neighbors are justifiably concerned about all of these Libyan activities. Those most affected, Niger and Nigeria, have taken steps to counter what they see as a growing threat of Libyan subversion across their porous borders. [REDACTED] 25X1

Nigerien President Kountche recognizes that Libyan designs on his country's uranium, coupled with tribal rivalries, a worsening economy, and a thinly distributed Army, make his regime vulnerable to Libyan meddling. [REDACTED] 25X1

[REDACTED] Kountche foiled an unsuccessful coup in 1976 by Libyan-backed exiles, and he has been increasingly preoccupied with internal security following Libya's move into Chad last year. The recent defection to Libya of a small group of Nigerien officials has contributed to his sense of insecurity. [REDACTED] 25X1

Kountche believes that Qadhafi seeks to incorporate Niger, along with Chad and Mali, into a Libyan-dominated Saharan state. Libya has supplied modern small arms and Libyan identity cards to nomadic tribesmen in northern Niger, increasing the security concerns of the meager government forces. Radio Tripoli has also begun broadcasts urging Niger's nomadic peoples to rebel. [REDACTED] 25X1

To tighten security, President Kountche has ordered police dragnets in Niamey and security checks throughout the country. He has replaced his defense and interior ministers and taken over these portfolios himself. In an effort to stay on the good side of Qadhafi, Kountche has resumed uranium sales to Libya. [REDACTED] 25X1

Nigeria, relatively complacent about Libyan activities in West Africa until Tripoli occupied Chad, is now alert to the danger. The Shagari government fears that Libya may attempt to use its foothold in Benin to exploit regional and religious divisions in Nigeria. Nigeria, moreover, feels vulnerable to outside meddling and internal unrest because of its own military shortcomings

4 November 1981

SECRET

SECRET

and a sharp decline in oil revenues stemming from the world oil glut. [REDACTED]

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Lagos closed Libya's Embassy late last year rather than accept its conversion to a People's Bureau. Libya transferred most of its diplomats in Lagos to Cotonou, raising Nigerian suspicions that they are up to no good.

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This past May Nigeria pressured Benin into accepting some 100 military advisers to provide some alternative to increased dependence on Soviet and Libyan military support. An advance contingent of Nigerian advisers are now in Benin taking French lessons, and a second contingent is scheduled to arrive for language training late this year.

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French Efforts Toward Rapprochement

The Mitterrand government is trying to promote closer ties with Benin in hopes of stemming further Soviet and Libyan inroads. France provided \$19.2 million in economic aid last year. Although the aid was desperately needed, French influence over Beninese policies is limited. Kerekou seems to favor increasing Benin's reliance on French and Western assistance and giving private enterprise a bigger role in the economy, but he cannot ignore the influential far leftists in his government. [REDACTED]

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Last September, Kerekou paid his first official visit to Paris since coming to power. He justified the trip domestically by underscoring Benin's increased ideological compatibility with the newly elected Mitterrand government, but staunch Soviet and Libyan supporters, particularly Foreign Minister Ogouma, lobbied strongly to prevent the trip. The French, hoping to boost Kerekou's prestige and encourage his pragmatism, promised increased economic aid and may have offered a small amount of military equipment. [REDACTED]

25X1

4 November 1981

In Sum

The Kerekou government probably will continue on its present course of maintaining itself in power through Libyan and Soviet military support, while attempting to gain additional Western economic aid. Benin, for example, may soften its radical stance on certain international issues in an effort to encourage France to increase its economic help. The instability of the Kerekou regime, however, makes it unlikely that Benin will jeopardize its economic and military relationship with Libya, at least in the short term. As a result, Benin's neighbors will continue to fear Libyan subversion and may be forced to intensify their efforts to counter Libyan influence there.

25X1

4 November 1981